

# **Your drinking water : who looks after it? the role of the Drinking Water Inspectorate in England and Wales / [Drinking Water Inspectorate].**

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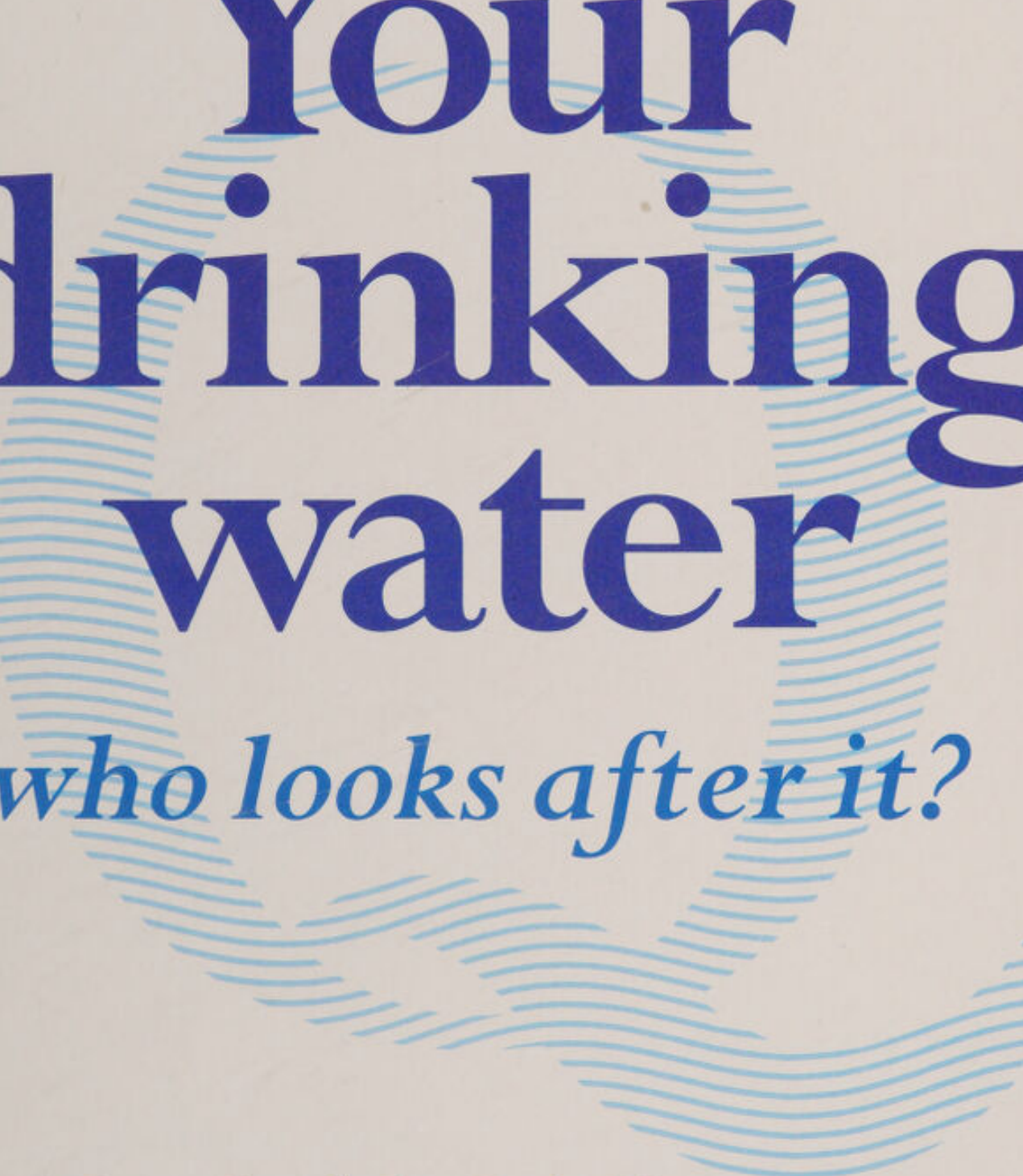
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# Your drinking water



*who looks after it?*

*The role of the Drinking Water  
Inspectorate in England and Wales*

**dwi**





*Drinking water in England and Wales is amongst the cleanest and safest in the world.*

*The Government's Drinking Water Inspectorate is there to make sure that it stays that way and gets better. It has responsibility for checking that water supplied by the water companies is wholesome and fit to drink when it reaches your home.*



## **what does the inspectorate do?**

The Inspectorate was set up in January 1990. Its professional staff have a wide range of experience and expert knowledge in chemistry, microbiology and engineering aspects of water supply. On health matters it gets advice from the Government's Chief Medical Officers. The Inspectorate's main task is to check that water companies supply water that is safe to drink and meets the stringent standards set in the Water Supply (Water Quality) Regulations.

## **who supplies drinking water?**

The water companies in England and Wales supply approximately 16,600 million litres of drinking water a day to about 50 million people - about 99% of the population.



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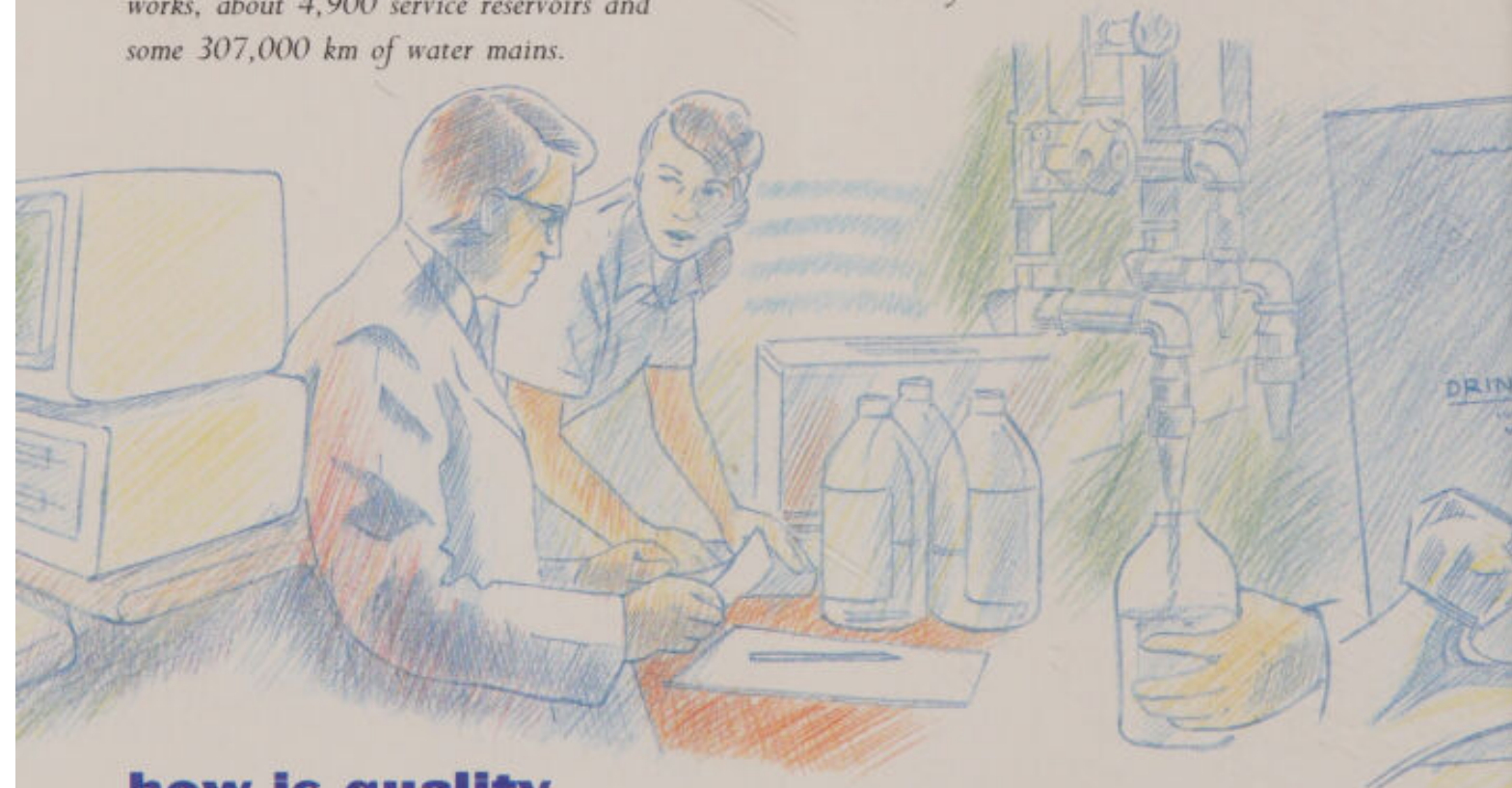


## where does it come from?

The water companies get their water from lowland rivers, from reservoirs, lakes and streams in the hills and from boreholes. Before water is supplied it is treated, often by being filtered to remove impurities, and disinfected. Drinking water is distributed partly by gravity and partly by pumping through the mains and holding tanks - called service reservoirs or water towers. There are just over 1,800 water treatment works, about 4,900 service reservoirs and some 307,000 km of water mains.

the companies are meeting all the requirements of the Regulations.

Environmental health officers of local councils also get information regularly from the companies which supply drinking water in their areas. They can also take their own samples and have them tested. If a council is not satisfied that the water is of a satisfactory quality, it has to tell the company. If the local authority is not satisfied with the company's response, it must tell the Inspectorate, who will consider whether any action is necessary.



## how is quality ensured?

The Water Quality Regulations set stringent legal standards for drinking water. These incorporate, and in some respects go further than, the standards in the EC Drinking Water Directive. The Regulations also require the water companies to take samples and test them to make sure that the water meets the standards. About 3.3 million such tests are made each year.

The Drinking Water Inspectorate checks that

## what is the inspector's role?

Every year, Inspectors carry out a technical audit of each company. This has two main parts:

- an assessment of the quality of drinking water supplied by the companies, and
- an inspection of the individual companies.

The assessment of water quality is based on information received regularly from the water companies. This information contains the



results of the millions of tests made each year to see if the water meets the 57 standards set in the Regulations. The inspection of the companies ensures that the information they are supplying is reliable and complete.

## what happens in an inspection?

Inspectors check to see that the right procedures and policies exist and that they are being followed at all levels in a company. Inspectors also look at records, check operational manuals, visit laboratories and water treatment works, and question company officials.

After the inspection is complete, the Chief Inspector considers whether the situation is satisfactory in all respects and, if not, whether the company should be required to take remedial action.

## what does the inspector check?

In an inspection five main areas are checked:

- are the right numbers of samples being taken from the right places and are the people taking the samples properly trained?
- are the people analysing samples properly trained and qualified, and is the laboratory properly managed?
- is the right type of water treatment being used for the quality of the water taken from its source; is all water disinfected so it contains no harmful bacteria when it goes into the mains and are approved products and processes being used?
- are the arrangements satisfactory for handling the very large amount of data that the companies hold and is it put promptly onto the public registers that all water companies must keep?
- will the completion dates be met for schemes to improve water quality, to which companies are committed?

## what about accidents?

Water companies must have satisfactory equipment and procedures to deal with accidents, and ensure that accidents do not cause any health risk for their consumers. The Inspectorate checks that this is the case. If there is any risk of infection, the company will advise consumers to boil the water before use.

The Inspectorate investigates every accident which affects, or might have affected, drinking water quality.

If a company supplies water which is unfit to drink, it could be prosecuted.

If consumers suffer loss or damage as a result of a company supplying water which does not meet the required standards, they have a right of redress under the Consumer Protection Act if the loss or damage amounts to more than £275. In addition, water companies have a duty of care under common law and consumers can claim compensation if a loss occurs, or damage is caused, through a company's negligence.





## how good is the drinking water in England and Wales?

Drinking water is generally of a high quality. The standards were met in 99% of the 3.3 million tests carried out by water companies in 1990.

If a particular sample of water does not meet all the standards, this does not necessarily mean it is unfit to drink. Some standards relate to the appearance of water, rather than health. Where a standard has been set for health reasons, this is normally on the basis of lifetime exposure, and there is a wide margin of safety.

Water companies have given legally binding undertakings to the Secretary of State that they will remedy the situations in which there are breaches of standards at the moment, most often by installing additional treatment plant. In most cases the deadline is 1995 or earlier, and over that period companies are committed to spending £1.8 billion on this. The Inspectorate checks progress, and also reviews company programmes to ensure that they continue to represent the fastest practicable remedial action. If a breach is detected which is not covered by existing undertakings, the Inspectorate considers whether the company ought to be required to carry out additional remedial action.

## what about bacteria in drinking water?

Water companies disinfect drinking water to remove harmful bacteria. Not all bacteria are harmful but if certain harmless bacteria are detected, it means either that disinfection has not been effective or the water has become contaminated subsequently, quite often by dirt on the consumer's tap. Where exceptionally bacteria are detected in the company's system it can respond by increasing the level of disinfection or by advising consumers temporarily to boil water before use.

## what about lead in drinking water?

The standard in the Regulations for lead in drinking water applies to water at the time of supply, and is generally met. However the samples taken by water companies are from consumers' taps and can therefore also contain lead taken up from any lead pipes the consumer may have.

Where there is a problem for a significant proportion of consumers in a particular area and treatment by the water company can reduce the amount of lead taken up from consumers' pipes, the companies are being required to install such treatment. Apart from that, reduction of lead levels at the consumer's tap may require the replacement of the consumer's own plumbing, which is his or her responsibility.

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## **what about aluminium in drinking water?**

Aluminium is widely present in the soil and therefore in some sources of drinking water. Some water companies also use aluminium compounds to remove impurities at their treatment works, and some may stay in the water supplied. The legal standard for aluminium has been set to prevent water looking cloudy. Companies are committed to programmes to achieve this standard, irrespective of the source of the aluminium. The amount of aluminium received from drinking water is less than the average intake from food. The total intake from food and water would still be well within the World Health Organisation's guidelines.

## **what about pesticides in drinking water?**

The legal standard is that there should be no, or virtually no, pesticides in drinking water. In some areas very small traces of pesticides have been detected in drinking water but medical advice is that the amounts swallowed from drinking water in every case were far smaller than the amounts which are known to be harmful or are likely to cause harm.

In addition to steps being taken to prevent pesticides getting into water sources, companies are installing treatment plant to remove pesticides. In most cases this will be in operation by 1995 or earlier but some will take a little longer.

## **what about nitrate in drinking water?**

The standard for nitrate is sometimes exceeded in some areas. Treatment plant is being installed to eliminate these breaches by 1995. If there were any evidence of a health hazard meanwhile, immediate action would be taken to provide an alternative supply to vulnerable groups.

## **where can I get information about my drinking water?**

The water companies are required by law to keep registers with information about water quality and the results of the tests they carry out. The registers are open to the public and the companies must tell consumers once a year with their water bill where they can see the registers. Information from the registers is also supplied on request.

## **what if there is a problem with my supply?**

If you have any problems with the quality of your drinking water, first of all tell your local water company. If you are not satisfied with their answer, get in touch with the environmental health officer of your local council and ask for an investigation, or you could contact the local Customer Service Committee of the Office of Water Services.

If you are still not satisfied, contact the Drinking Water Inspectorate at: Drinking Water Inspectorate, Room B155, Romney House, 43 Marsham Street, London SW1P 3PY. Telephone 071-276-8808

